

CHINA TODAY UPDATE

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1 Update

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By Paul Eckert

WASHINGTON

(Reuters) - Economic development researchers on Monday unveiled a database of China's aid to Africa in an effort to work around Beijing's secrecy about the numbers, as a debate rages over the intentions and impact of Chinese assistance.

The study and database by the Washington-based Centre for Global Development and Aid Data, a research project, includes 1,673 Chinese development finance projects worth \$75 billion in 50 African countries from the years 2000-2011.

The Chinese figures, using standard measures of Official Development Assistance (ODA) and Other Official Finance (OOF), are roughly on par with U.S. aid to Africa during the same period, the Centre for Global Development said.

While official ODA from Western countries and some major developing countries is openly reported and easily tabulated, Chinese aid has been much more difficult to track, said creators of the database, china.aiddata.org.

"China treats its aid activities as a state secret and this is an attempt to uncover what's going on," said Andreas Fuchs, an economics professor at Heidelberg University in Germany and a visiting researcher at Princeton University.

"This topic arouses very strong reactions, positive and negative, and people are very polarized in their strong opinions," added Brad Parks, executive director of Aid Data and a researcher at the College of William and Mary.

Among the accusations levelled at China are that its aid to Africa is chiefly aimed at exploiting natural resources; it unconditionally supports undemocratic and corrupt regimes; and it undermines good governance, debt relief and environmental policies promoted by traditional Western donors.

DIVERSITY OF PROJECTS

China rejects these assertions, which have been put forward by some African and Western aid experts and officials. Scholarly research has challenged some of the criticisms, but Beijing's secrecy on the issue keeps suspicions festering.

When the research team approached China's Ministry of Commerce, which oversees main components of the country's aid program, the answer they got was, "Everyone who needs to know about our generosity already knows," Parks said.

The database, compiled from English- and Chinese-language media reports on African projects, includes an interactive map that breaks down information to country and project levels. It will continually incorporate contributions from those involved in African aid, Parks and Fuchs told Reuters in an interview.

The creators of the database offered no judgments on the contentious questions surrounding Chinese aid to Africa, saying their aim was to inform the debate with data that has been missing from existing aid statistics.

But Parks said one stereotype about China in Africa - that Beijing focuses on resource extraction and big infrastructure projects like roads, dams and stadiums - partly unravels in the face of the newly compiled data.

Along with those big projects, "they do a lot in the health sector, they do a lot in the education sector, they do a lot in government and civil society sector ... a lot of things not usually appreciated as activities supported by the Chinese government," he said.

"It's just striking the diversity of the work they do in the development arena," Parks said.

(Reporting by Paul Eckert; Editing by Eric Beech)

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